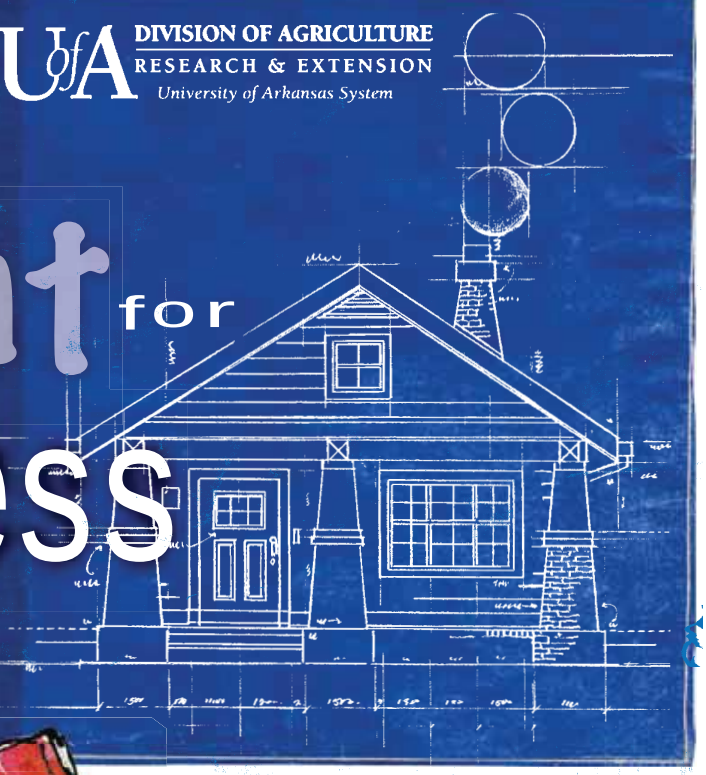
U of A DIVISION OF AGRICULTURE
RESEARCH & EXTENSION
University of Arkansas System

Your Blueprint for Happiness

Five Principles for Building a Better Life



Have you ever wished you had a blueprint for happiness? Many people have wished that there was some single thing they could do to magically transform their lives, making themselves happier and their lives more meaningful. The proposed solutions have ranged from self-esteem programs to nutrition supplements and everything in between. Although these approaches may have some benefits, their effectiveness is often not proven or their benefits have been overstated. Many of them simply can't deliver on their promises of happiness and well-being.

You may imagine that the perfect life is being pampered on a tropical island. It sounds great. And it may be enjoyable for short periods of time. But research shows that building well-being is more like constructing a house than lounging on a tropical island. This means that creating happiness in your life isn't mysterious or magical — it's something you can and should intentionally plan and build.

If you try to build a house without a plan, or if you build based on a faulty plan, your house will be shaky and easily damaged. But if you build based on a well-developed blueprint, your house will endure and enrich your life for years to come. Building happiness is a similar process.

Researchers who study the science of happiness and well-being have identified key principles you can practice to improve the quality of your life. They have discovered that choosing to focus on what is positive, good, and meaningful about your life —past, present, and future— creates happiness and forms the foundation of well-being. Knowing and using your strengths form the body (or walls) of your well-being, and the roof of your well-being is built by serving others.

This workbook will briefly describe five important principles that will guide you as you develop your unique blueprint for building greater happiness. The questions, suggestions, and activities in this workbook will then help you apply those principles to your life.

Are you ready to begin building a happier life?

Laying the Foundation for Happiness

Just as with any building, your happiness must be built on a solid foundation. The foundation for happiness is all about how you make sense of the world. The way you perceive your life experiences—what you choose to focus on and how you choose to interpret those experiences—powerfully shapes your emotions, your view of life, and your overall happiness.

The foundation for happiness is all about how you make sense of the world.

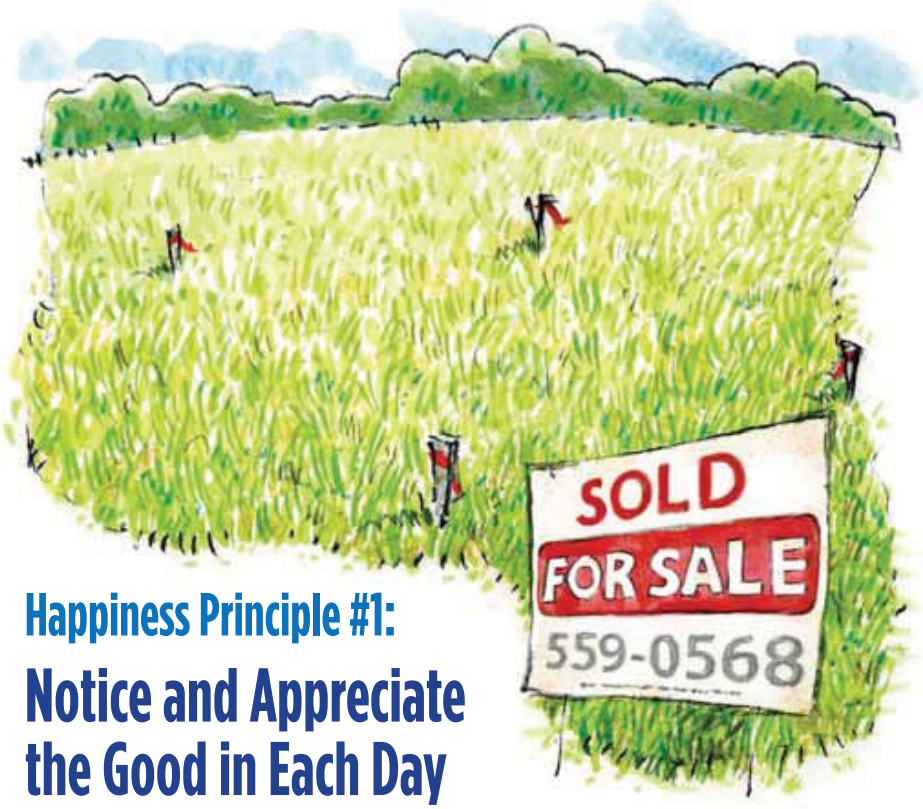
- As you go through each day, you may choose to focus on the details and events that annoy or upset you, or you may choose to focus on aspects that uplift and enrich you.

- When you reflect on past events, you don't remember those events objectively. Instead, you interpret them as bad or good. You string your interpretations into a story that either holds you hostage to your past or gives positive meaning to your present.

- When you look toward the future, you may dwell on worries and fears, or you may envision worthwhile plans and hopes.

These mental choices either undermine or create a solid foundation for happiness. The first three happiness principles relate to the way people interpret the past, present, and future. These form the foundation of your personal well-being.

Let's start by considering how you can change the way you think about the present.



Happiness Principle #1:

Notice and Appreciate the Good in Each Day

The first foundational way to be happy is to look for the good in every single day. People who look for the good in their daily lives are happier and accomplish more.

Many people believe that their circumstances determine how they feel. If the events of the day are frustrating, disappointing or stressful, they assume it is inevitable to experience negative emotions—to not feel happy with life. But research has shown that the happiest people aren't happier because they have better life circumstances than others; they are happier because they have learned to look for and appreciate what is good about each day.

Appreciation in action: William was born with muscular dystrophy. As if that weren't enough, he also suffered from various physical and psychological disorders. At the age of 12, his family expected him to support himself by selling drugs. His life was hard. Years later, he became a good friend to Wally's family. Once, Wally and his wife visited William at a time when he was confined to a wheelchair at a treatment facility. He was unable to walk, to work, or to carry on a normal life. As he was brought to the visiting area, Wally greeted him: "How are you doing, William?" He looked up from his wheelchair and cheerfully replied: "I can breathe! And it just doesn't get any better than that!" Yes, Wally thought, breathing is a great gift. William was an inspiring example of someone who enjoyed life in spite of his difficult circumstances.

Everyone has ways of thinking and acting that encourage misery. For example, you can stack up your stresses and expectations until you are crushed by them. You can complain about and wish away your day-to-day tasks, making your life seem dreary. Any number of things can make you irritated, burdened, or negative.

By replacing those negative thinking habits with some of the positive ones listed below, you can intentionally choose to be happier. With that happiness come richer relationships and greater productivity. You can choose to be happier by noticing and appreciating what is good about each day.

Do you want to make today more enjoyable and productive? Here are some ways to help. Put a check mark by those that you want to do.

- ☐ 1. Close your eyes and picture something you have already enjoyed today.
- ☐ 2. Take a walk with a focus on enjoying nature and your surroundings.
- ☐ 3. Explore your home. Notice and appreciate things in your home that are meaningful to you.
- ☐ 4. Think of good people who enrich your life and list some of the ways they bless you.
- ☐ 5. Get a journal or notebook and write down at least two things that went well today. Make a habit of doing this every day.
- ☐ 6. Think over your schedule each morning and anticipate the blessings in the day ahead.
- ☐ 7. Review your day and see what benefits you can find in both common everyday experiences and difficult experiences.
- ☐ 8. Call a friend and tell him or her about something you enjoyed today.
- ☐ 9. Celebrate the joys and successes of those around you.
- ☐ 10. Don't allow the irritations of the day to crowd out the positive parts.

What other ways can you think of to help you enjoy each day? How can you incorporate each of the items you've chosen into your daily routine?

As you do these things, notice how your happiness increases. Continue to refine your plan based on what works for you.

Happiness Principle #2:
Focus on the Positives in Your Past

Everyone chooses memories to construct a unique life story. This story can be happy or sad depending on how they choose to think about these memories.

Think of defining memories from your life—memories that show who you are and what matters to you. Please list them in the space below.

You likely have two types of defining memories, those that are painful and those that are positive.

Painful memories

Painful memories are some of the most challenging to work with, but they are an important part of who you are. For example, you may have been deeply hurt by people in your life. Or you may have hurt others. These memories need to be rehabilitated to serve a positive role in your personal foundation.

Forgiveness in action: A young woman waited for her dad to awaken in the hospital after he had a stroke. She felt nothing but bitterness for this man who had deserted the family after divorcing her mother. After her parents' divorce, she rarely saw her father and never felt connected to him. She was angry at him for not being a part of her life. Now he was paralyzed from the waist down, and she felt no sympathy for his condition. She felt that it was his turn to do some suffering. Now she would desert him just as he had deserted her.

But something — maybe a sense of duty or obligation — kept her coming back to the hospital each day. To her surprise, her father seemed grateful for her visits and even expressed an interest in her life. He was endlessly curious about her. He gave her small gifts. Over the months that followed, she visited him, shared stories and music with him, and helped him with his rehab. One day, she realized that she had grown to know and appreciate her once-absent father. As a result, resentment had turned into friendship. Seeing her father as a person instead of a source of pain enabled her to understand and forgive him.

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There are three ways you can rehabilitate painful memories:

1. You can find positive meaning and growth in your painful memories and experiences. As you look back on the painful memories, identify lessons you have learned and ways you have become stronger as a result of those difficult experiences. Make some notes in the space below to remind you of what you learned or ways you have grown.

2. You can also drain the poison out of bad memories by forgiving the people who offended you. As part of your effort to forgive them, you can try to understand their motivations and struggles. You can choose to set them and yourself free of the pain. Make a note of the new way you choose to think about that person or situation.

3. In those cases where you have hurt others, you can seek forgiveness from them in order to gain peace. Make a note of ways you can make amends.

Make sure you apply one or more of these solutions to each of your painful memories. Then stop allowing painful memories to take up an unproductive share of your thoughts. Stop dwelling on negative aspects of your life and decide to move forward into a better present.

If you find that the pain is too great, or that you are having trouble working through these issues on your own, you may want to seek help from a qualified mental health professional.

Positive memories

Positive memories are those that make you the happiest and can have long-lasting effects in shaping your identity. Close your eyes and relive some of the memories you have identified as your best. Notice that when you relive positive memories, positive emotions naturally fill your mind.

Once you have identified your positive memories, you can give them greater prominence in your life. Maybe you write them up and share them with friends and family. Maybe you display pictures or symbols that remind you of those experiences on the wall of your home or in your wallet. Maybe you take pictures that remind you of great times and important people in your life. Maybe you make a scrapbook. What other ways can you make your best memories more prominent?

Now reflect on your entire life story—including all of your defining memories—and consider which themes have been most important in shaping the person you are. Is your life a story of survival, friendship, growth, joy, exploration, perseverance, steadiness, thoughtfulness, creativity, accomplishment, or some other theme? Pick the themes of your life and place them as cornerstones in the foundation of your happiness.

How you tell your story determines how happy you will be with your life. Choose to rehabilitate your painful memories, focus on your positive memories, and create affirming themes in your life.

Shaping your story through connections with others

You can also change your perspective on your past by connecting with others who have shared your history. Below are some ways to do this. Put a check mark by those things that you want to do.

- ☐ 1. Write letters expressing gratitude to people who have had a positive impact on you. You can even write notes to people who are no longer alive or an active part of your life.
- ☐ 2. Interview family members you admire. Ask those people what experiences helped them develop the strengths and characteristics you respect. What can you learn from those people and their experiences? What strengths can you see in your family history that are a part of who you are today? Record those interviews and observations so that you can review them when you need inspiration.
- ☐ 3. Talk to older members of your family and gather up pictures and documents. Study the lives of your ancestors. Cultivate feelings of connection and gratitude by coming to know your ancestors and their stories.

Once you have selected activities from the list above, plan a specific time to do them.

Happiness Principle #3:
Look Forward to Tomorrow

Many people drain themselves of happiness through worry and fear about the future. It doesn't help that we live in a culture of 24-hour news cycles that present us with an endless stream of issues to worry about. You might worry about decisions you face, the stability of your job, your personal shortcomings, your children's safety, your health, the direction the world is going … the list can be endless. Frequent worry and fear about the future can limit the happiness you enjoy in the present.

An optimistic view: When Charles was diagnosed with Multiple Sclerosis, his friends asked him: "Won't this be hard to bear?" "Oh, no!" he laughed. "This is no big deal. I had chronic asthma as a child, and I know how to deal with challenges."

There are things you can do to manage your fears and worries about the future. You can begin by asking yourself if the amount of time you are investing in worry is appropriate and helpful. Problems do occur. You should be aware of those that impact you. You should take the appropriate steps to prevent or manage them. But many people invest a great deal of time and energy worrying about things that are unlikely to happen or are beyond their control.

When you begin worrying about something that might happen in the future, ask yourself: "What is the chance that this will actually happen? Is this something I can do anything about?" Depending upon your answers to those questions, choose from among these options.

Have courage to face challenges. Is fear holding you back? Maybe you need to make a decision, start down a new path, or repair a relationship, but you are afraid of the challenges. Make a commitment to confront the situation. Ask yourself: When have I been at my best in dealing with a challenge like this? What resources did I use? Were there people who helped me? How did I overcome my fears? Use what you've learned from past successes to deal with your current challenge.

Accept what you cannot change. There will always be things you worry about that you cannot control, but you can control your reactions. Don't focus on and fret about things that are beyond your control. Worry robs you of time and peace; it is not productive. Resist the temptation to focus on worst-case scenarios. What is the best-case scenario?

Manage what is in your control. If a problem is within your control, ask yourself: "What can I do to manage it?" For example, if you are worried about losing your job, you might update your resume and begin searching for a new job. Managing what is in your control will help you create the future you want.

Manage your way of thinking. Negativity drains you of energy. The gloomy point of view sees failures as:

Personal:
"I failed because I'm stupid."

Permanent:
"I've always been this way and always will be."

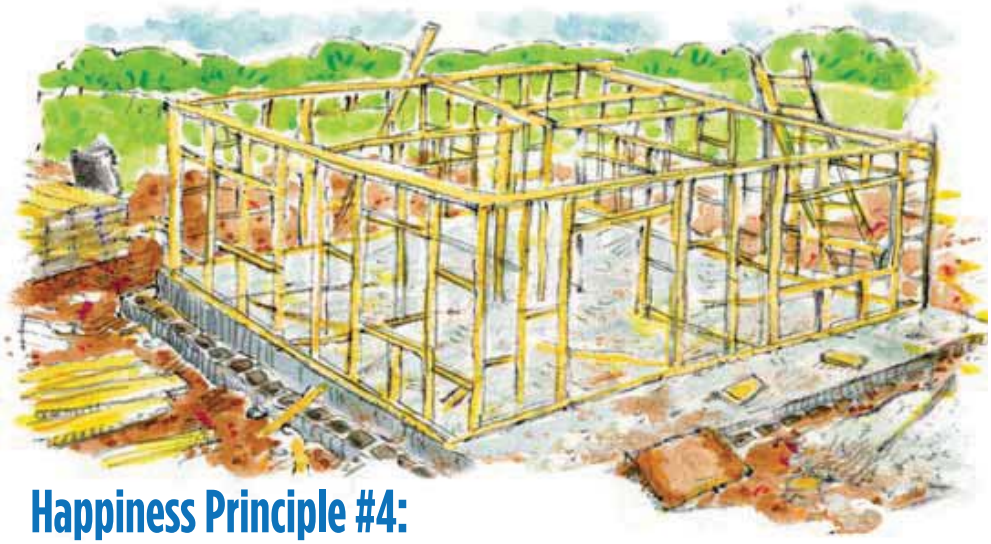
Pervasive:
"I make the same stupid mistakes in all areas of my life."

This point of view guarantees continuing gloom and failure. If instead you see failure as part of a learning process, you launch a cycle of positive thinking and greater success: "I made a mistake, but I learned from it. I will do better next time."

In contrast to negativity, hope is energizing. How can you infuse hope into your thought process? Some people draw on religious faith. Some lean on friends.

Create things to look forward to. Identify something that would bring you happiness and make it happen. This might be a major event such as a trip or starting a big project you would love to work on. Or it might be a small thing you could look forward to on a more regular basis. For example, you could plan to read a good book, schedule lunch with a friend, or arrange a weekend getaway. What can you do that will give you something to look forward to?

There will always be uncertainty and challenges in life. You can manage your thoughts by spending less time on unproductive fears and worries. You can look forward to the future with hope and peace.



Happiness Principle #4:
Know and Use Your Strengths

The way that you think about yourself and your life is only the foundation for building happiness. The next task is to build the body of the house. You do this by identifying your strengths and designing your life to use them often.

Each of us has personal strengths—positive characteristics that come naturally to us. Research has shown we will be more likely to thrive in life if we identify our unique strengths and design our lives to use them. We will feel encouraged and energized.

Identify your personal strengths

The first step in this process is to identify your unique personal strengths. Here are a few ideas to help you discover your strengths. Put a check mark by those that you want to do:

- ☐ 1. List the activities you love to do or at which you excel. What do those things tell you about your strengths?
- ☐ 2. Interview people who appreciate you. Ask them what strengths they see in you.
- ☐ 3. Complete an online personality assessment that will help you understand the ways in which you work best. Some people work best in large groups, some in small. Some like creative tasks, while others prefer more practical ones. You can search online for personality tests like the Keirsey Temperament Sorter or the Myers-Briggs Type Indicator.
- ☐ 4. Read a book that helps you identify your strengths. Check at your local library or bookstore. For example, you might choose to read *Strengthsfinder 2.0* or *Now, Discover Your Strengths.*
- ☐ 5. Complete the VIA Survey of Character Strengths (VIASCS) online at **www.authentichappiness.org**. This assessment will help you identify your greatest strengths. To introduce you to the VIASCS, you can complete the short version on the next page.

Brief Strengths Test

How well does each of the statements below describe you?
[These options arrayed in columns to the right]

	Very untrue of me	Untrue of me	Somewhat untrue of me	Neutral	Somewhat true of me	True of me	Very true of me
1. CREATIVITY: I love to make new things	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
2. CURIOSITY: I like to explore	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
3. GOOD JUDGMENT: I make good decisions	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
4. LOVE OF LEARNING: I love to learn	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
5. WISDOM: I have good insight	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
6. COURAGE: I am brave	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
7. PERSISTENCE: I finish what I start	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
8. HONESTY: I tell the truth	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
9. ENTHUSIASM: I am excited about life	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
10. LOVE: I care about people	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
11. KINDNESS: I do nice things for others	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
12. SOCIAL SKILLS: I get along well with people	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
13. TEAMWORK: I work well in groups	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
14. FAIRNESS: I treat people fairly	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
15. LEADERSHIP: I provide direction to others	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
16. FORGIVENESS: I forgive those who hurt me	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
17. HUMILITY: I put others before myself	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
18. DISCRETION: I avoid doing things I would later regret	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
19. SELF-CONTROL: I control my impulses and emotions	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
20. APPRECIATION OF BEAUTY: I value beauty and excellence	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
21. GRATITUDE: I feel thankful often	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
22. OPTIMISM: I keep a positive attitude	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
23. PLAYFULNESS: I am fun-loving	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
24. SPIRITUALITY: My beliefs comfort and guide me	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐

Your top strengths are called your signature strengths. Which five best describe you? Circle them.

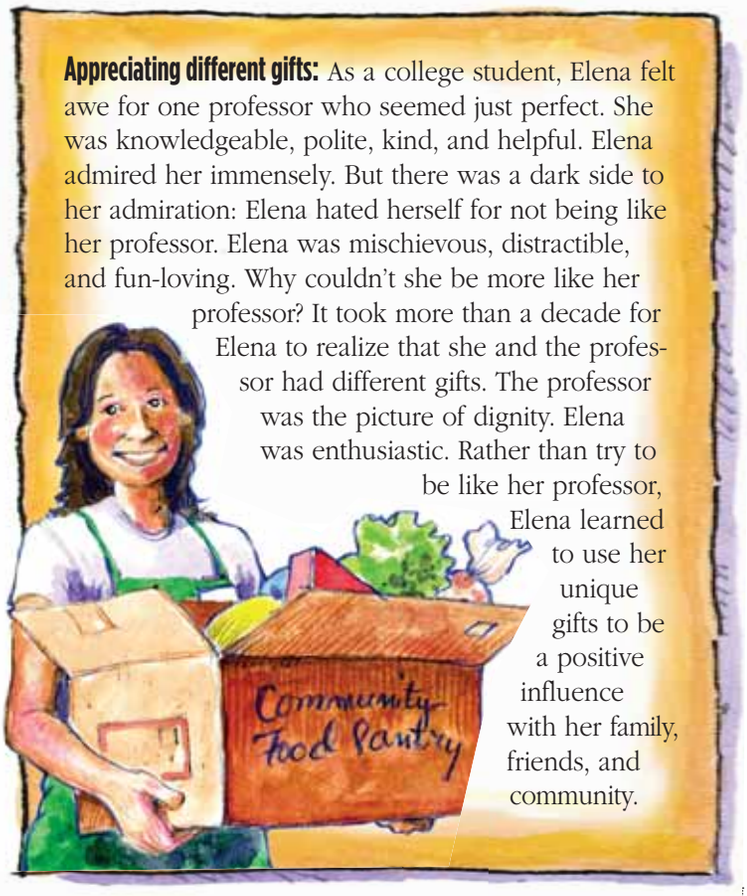
In addition to knowing your strengths, you can be a strengths-finder for the people around you. When you point out the strengths that you see in children, friends or colleagues, it helps them become more productive and happy.

Value your personal strengths

Sometimes you can become so caught up in admiring other people's strengths that you forget to appreciate your own. You may know your strengths but minimize them. You may act as if your particular strengths are unimportant. Or you may believe that everyone has those strengths.

The truth is that everyone has different strengths, and each strength is valuable. It makes no sense to expect fish to climb trees, eagles to jog, or squirrels to swim. That doesn't mean they are failures. Fish are great swimmers. Eagles are amazing flyers. Squirrels are marvelous climbers.

It is the same with humans. Everyone is good at some things but not as good at others. When you try to be good at everything, you make yourself crazy. You can be happier if you focus on the strengths you have rather than on your weaknesses.



Appreciating different gifts: As a college student, Elena felt awe for one professor who seemed just perfect. She was knowledgeable, polite, kind, and helpful. Elena admired her immensely. But there was a dark side to her admiration: Elena hated herself for not being like her professor. Elena was mischievous, distractible, and fun-loving. Why couldn't she be more like her professor? It took more than a decade for Elena to realize that she and the professor had different gifts. The professor was the picture of dignity. Elena was enthusiastic. Rather than try to be like her professor, Elena learned to use her unique gifts to be a positive influence with her family, friends, and community.

Use your strengths

When you use your strengths regularly, you will be happier, more productive, and continue to grow. Just as physical exercise builds your muscles, acting on your signature strengths builds your well-being. Think about ways to use the strengths you identified:

1. Have you ever taken on a challenging task you enjoyed so much that you lost track of time and became totally absorbed? This is what psychologists call "flow" and it is an important way to use your strengths. See if you can list several activities that have created flow for you. How will you design your life to create more flow?

2. Most people run on auto-pilot. They go thoughtlessly through life doing what comes easily. In contrast, when you design your life to use your strengths, you live life more fully. Take a few minutes for personal reflection, close your eyes and imagine your idea of a perfect day—not a vacation day, but a normal day. Where do you live? What kind of work do you do? With whom do you spend time? How will you change your life to make it match that perfect day more closely?

3. How can you build on your strengths? You might get further training or education. You might take an informal class within your community. You might find someone to mentor you. What will you do?

4. How can you design your life to use your strengths more? Maybe you could talk with your employer about ways to better use your strengths at work. Maybe you could develop a hobby or personal interest that involves your strengths. Perhaps you could use your strengths volunteering in your community. How will you better use your strengths?

Manage and minimize your weaknesses

Even though it helps you live better when you know your strengths, you may be tempted to dwell on your weaknesses. You may worry about them a lot. You may spend a lifetime trying to overcome them. In the meantime, you neglect your strengths. That's a bad plan. Psychologists say that people will never overcome all of their weaknesses. But your happiness and productivity depend more on knowing and using your strengths than on overcoming your weaknesses. The happiest and most productive way to live is by using your strengths while managing your weaknesses.

If someone were to sit you down and tell you all the things that are wrong with you, would that motivate you to grow and improve? Or would it make you tired and discouraged? Most people would get discouraged. When you spend a lot of time thinking about your faults, you probably get depressed. Dwelling on your limitations is not energizing.

That doesn't mean you should ignore your weaknesses. You need a plan for managing them. For example, if you struggle with budgeting, maybe you could recruit a family member or friend to help you create a plan. You could also find resources online. You might plan a specific day of the month to pay your bills and review your finances. What friends, family members, or resources do you have that can help you in areas where you are weak?

Happiness Principle #5: Choose to Serve

The crowning achievement (or roof) of your happiness is when you use your strengths to support and shelter your friends, family, and community. Life becomes rich and meaningful as you dedicate yourself to improving the lives of others.

Some people choose to serve by participating in community or religious organizations. But service doesn't have to be limited to formal roles in organizations. Service can also be offered informally as we reach out to neighbors, people at our church, or family members. It might involve a service project, but it could also take the form of a personal visit, a written note, or a phone call.

Empowered through service: Denise is a humble person who doesn't like being the center of attention. Her unique gift is to identify people who are often forgotten and invest one-on-one time with them. Sometimes she will spend an entire day helping a widow with tasks around the house. At the end of the day, she feels energized by the experience.

Here are some ways you may choose to serve.

1. Notice and be glad for the opportunities you already have to serve, including the service you give to family members. Service within families can seem draining at times, but families are one of the best places to make a difference. What are some of the ways you're already serving in your family? What other ways can you serve your loved ones?

2. Focus your service. There may be some ways you are currently serving that are less meaningful to you. Maybe you belong to a service organization that doesn't serve in the ways you value most. Maybe you are asked to do things that emphasize your weaknesses. Prune away those activities that consume your time without giving you meaningful opportunities to serve. Instead, participate in service that honors your values and allows you to use your signature strengths. What are some ways you can focus your service?

3. Notice or ask about needs in your community. Maybe you will discover a need to pick up litter in your neighborhood. Maybe you will learn about lonely people who would like to be visited. In what new way will you serve your community?

4. Draw other people together to serve as a group. Who are some of the people who might join you in service?

Service can be a satisfying part of your life. You don't want to overload your schedule, but when you choose the right service opportunities, they will be energizing instead of draining.

Conclusion

As you have worked your way through the ideas and questions in this workbook, some of them have probably stood out to you. You may have felt inspired by them. That is an important signal. When you have such feelings, it's a good idea to take notes. Notice what things seem most important. Make a plan. Take action.

Notice what things seem most important. Make a plan. Take action.

We recommend that you occasionally reread this workbook. As you progress in life, you will find new ideas that stand out to you. They are your next opportunity for growth.

You might identify someone with whom to share the ideas and applications in this workbook. By working with another person, you are more likely to get new ideas and apply them more consistently.

As you choose to focus on what is good, positive and meaningful, as you identify and use your personal strengths, and as you choose to serve, you will build a happier life.

To get additional great materials for personal and family well-being, go to **www.uaex.edu** and under the Health & Living tab, click on Personal & Family Well-Being.

References and Recommended Resources:

Authentic Happiness (2002) by Martin Seligman is one of the most important books ever written on personal well-being. It is based on decades of research on how to thrive as a person.

Positivity (2009) by Barbara Fredrickson provides practical application of the scientific discovery that a positive orientation in life makes us both happier and more productive.

The How of Happiness (2008) by Sonja Lyubomirsky delivers sage advice and practical applications to help you become happier.

The Happiness Hypothesis (2006) by Jonathan Haidt is filled with insight about the many quirks in human thinking that keep you from acting rationally and finding happiness.

Finding Flow (1998) by Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi describes that remarkable state when you focus on challenging tasks and become so involved in them that you lose track of time.

Wishcraft (2003) by Barbara Sher and Annie Gottlieb guides you in designing a life that is more in line with your dreams.

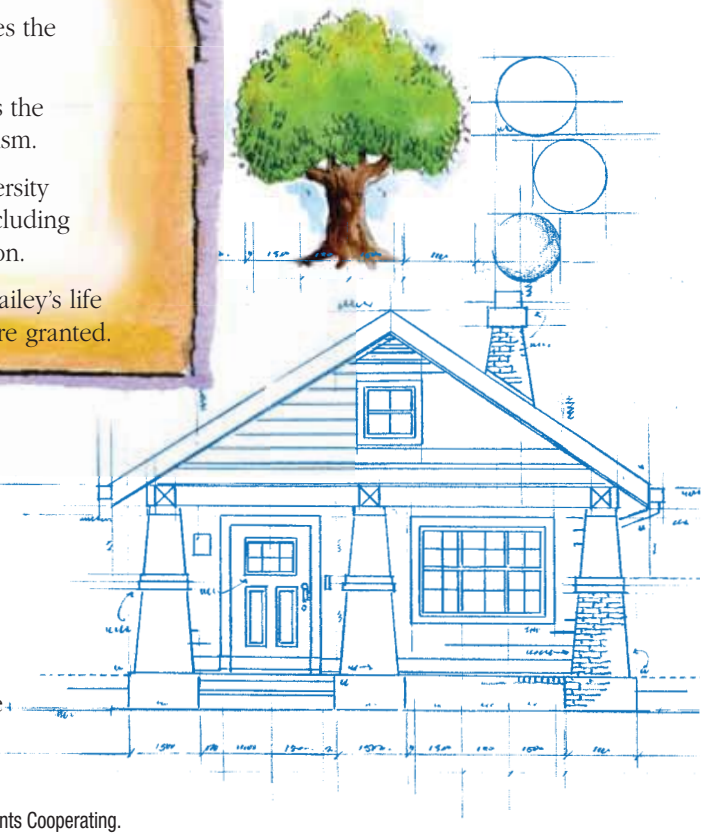
The Science of Fear (2009) by Daniel Gardner shows that most of your fears are based on irrational thinking and exaggerations by the media.

Learned Optimism (1991) by Martin E. P. Seligman challenges the pessimistic thinking that makes you miserable.

The Optimistic Child (1995) by Martin E. P. Seligman teaches the way you can help your children develop the habit of optimism.

www.authentichappiness.org is a website from the University of Pennsylvania that offers many measures of well-being including emotions, engagement with life, meaning, and life satisfaction.

It's A Wonderful Life is a classic movie that shows George Bailey's life review and the conclusion that you can enjoy the life you are granted.



Credits:

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Thanks to Barbara Keil and Karen Kuralt for their valuable contributions to this work.

Thanks to a supportive team: Joy Buffalo, Carley Dangar, Elizabeth Johnson, Kathryn McElderry, Kara Newcomb, Rebecca Simon, and Ashley Winberry.

Thanks to our amazing artist and designer: C. Bruce Dupree

FCS 813

University of Arkansas, United States Department of Agriculture and County Governments Cooperating.

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Printed by University of Arkansas Cooperative Extension Service Printing Services.

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